UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

UTOPIA BY A THOUSAND CUTS:

MELODRAMA AND THE QUEER ART OF SELF-HARM IN HANYA YANAGIHARA'S *A LITTLE LIFE*

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the 2015 novel *A Little Life*'s numerous connections to melodrama, drawing links between Hanya Yanagihara's writing and historical characteristics of the melodramatic mode. Beyond a basic conception of melodrama as exaggerated and over-the-top, there lies a complex history dating back hundreds of years. Yanagihara does not, however, simply provide an overview of melodrama's past in *A Little Life*; she also looks forward into melodrama's future. The central argument of this thesis concerns our traumatized main character, Jude: what if we dare read his repeated self-harm as a kind of art that pushes the limits of melodrama to the body? Backed by close readings of Jude's cutting, I will propose that his daily private acts of masochism can and should be read through the lens of artistic creation, as he navigates an aesthetic realm defined by both immense pain and utopian possibility. I will suggest Yanagihara queers melodrama by imagining Jude's cutting—an act of intense feeling he deliberately performs without an audience—as an anti-theatrical, yet melodramatic art form. In making this argument, I will touch upon multiple facets of art history ranging from the body-art movement of the 1960s and 70s, to the earlier history of the modernist closet drama originating in the 19th century. By theorizing Jude's self-injury as art, we allow for the queer possibility of a nonnormative, audienceless melodrama that ultimately allows Jude to glimpse a utopian world where he is no longer afflicted by his childhood trauma.

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And the terror, and the horror

God, I wonder why we bother

All the glamour, and the trauma

And the fucking melodrama

– Lorde, “Sober II (Melodrama)”

Introduction

The release of Hanya Yanagihara's 2015 novel *A Little Life* caused ripples in the landscape of contemporary literature. Immediately, the novel gained attention for three primary characteristics: its powerful prose, its extreme length, and its heavy depictions of violence. Few novels in the 21st century have spurred such impassioned—and polarized—reactions from readers. Fans posted pictures of themselves creatively posing with the book's cover on social media, merchandise was sold displaying the four main characters' names—Malcolm, Willem, Jude, and JB—and readers flocked to the New York City street where two of the characters first lived in the novel. Admirers of *A Little Life* even tattooed references from the book onto their bodies (Mamanna and Yanagihara). Simultaneously, popular media outlets described many readers' discomfort—and at times abhorrence—with the depictions of violence in *A Little Life*. In *The New York Review of Books*, for example, literary critic Daniel Mendelsohn decried the novel's "unending parade of aesthetically gratuitous scenes of punitive and humiliating violence." Other readers have frequently utilized the terms "torture porn" and "misery-literature" to critique the novel's treatment of child abuse, rape, and self-harming behaviors (Kellermann 335; Needham; Herring 135). Nevertheless, *A Little Life* rose to the top of the bestseller charts and became a finalist for the National Book Award, as well as the Man Booker Prize. What feelings fueled such a positive reception of the novel? One writer for the *New Yorker* details her fervent consumption of the novel, as well as its reciprocal consumption of her:

> From the moment I picked up *A Little Life*, I couldn't put it down. I read the whole thing in three days. When it was over, I felt sorry and reluctant to read anything else. I actually started *rereading* it—I reread the first twenty pages, and then I stopped, not because I wanted to but because I had professional obligations to read other things. (Batuman)

Review after review points to the extreme emotions coursing through the book. Countless writers over the past eight years have highlighted *A Little Life*'s affective impact on readers as it charts the journey of Jude St. Francis, the novel's perpetually suffering protagonist, while he endures a lifetime of physical and emotional harm.

Multiple critics have connected their visceral reactions to the novel with its "exaggeration" of violence (Adams; Masad). Across 800 pages, Yanagihara subjects her readership to horrific event after horrific event, from child abuse to sex trafficking, attempted homicide to multiple suicides, and a litany of self-harming practices including cutting, burning, and bludgeoning. Thus, many have turned to the idea of melodrama as a means of describing the novel's excessive violence and over-the-top emotionality (Greenwell; Kellermann 334). Even Yanagihara herself has described *A Little Life* as a "celebration of melodrama," stating clearly: "I wanted there to be something too much about the violence in the book, but I also wanted there to be an exaggeration of everything, an exaggeration of love, of empathy, of pity, of horror. I wanted everything turned up a little too high" (Cheung; Adams).

The excess of *A Little Life* becomes increasingly apparent as the novel progresses. We first meet our four central characters in their twenties, fresh out of college together and searching for success in the fast-paced world of New York City. Malcolm pursues a career in architecture, JB in art, Willem in acting, and Jude in law. Quickly, Jude becomes the narrative focus of the story as we see him grapple with a mysterious pain in his lower back and legs, which leaves him incapacitated for hours when it flares up. Although JB, Malcolm, and Willem are curious as to the cause of his pain, Jude refrains from revealing anything about his past to them. Whenever prodded, he remains silent. Throughout the novel, however, we slowly gain greater insight into Jude's traumatic past through frequent flashbacks. After his parents abandon him during infancy, Jude moves to a monastery where he is raised by abusive monks who mentally, physically, and sexually assault him on a routine basis. However, these early days in the monastery are only the start of his trauma. One of the monks, Brother Luke, escapes the monastery with Jude, but the dream of safety that Brother Luke offers quickly dissipates when he pressures Jude into child prostitution. Spending night after night with unknown men in random motel rooms leaves Jude with irreparable emotional scars. Even after Jude escapes Brother Luke's clutches, the horrors do not cease. Jude is again abused by counselors in the group home he is placed in. After he escapes the home, he falls into the evil hands of a man named Dr. Taylor, who repeatedly rapes Jude and then deliberately runs him over with his car one night. This incident ultimately causes the chronic pain that afflicts Jude's legs and back for much of his adult life.

Following this horrific incident, Jude's life becomes increasingly normal, as he goes off to a prestigious East Coast college and meets Malcolm, JB, and Willem. However, the shame and trauma of his childhood perpetually haunt Jude. Yanagihara describes in graphic detail the self-harming practices Jude develops in order to manage his trauma. Jude's cutting ebbs and flows throughout his life, as he struggles to process the pain of his traumatic past. Oftentimes, the cutting becomes worse during important moments in Jude's life, like when his former law professor, Harold, adopts him and finally fulfills Jude's dream of having a father. The cutting becomes more severe, too, after Jude enters an abusive relationship with a fashion designer named Caleb, who sexually and physically assaults him to the point of hospitalization. Although Jude's friends urge him to try therapy to process his trauma, he never finds utility in the practice. Instead, he finds repeated refuge in razor blades, until his suffering finally becomes too much to bear and he kills himself in the novel's last act by injecting air into an artery. Jude's tragic death is not surprising, though. It becomes apparent long before the novel's end that Yanagihara has, in her own words, crafted "a character that never gets better" (Kavanagh). In my brief sketch of Jude's horrific life, we can see the novel's "deliberately implausible superrealism" in full display

(Herring 145). Ultimately, *A Little Life*'s extremity has led many critics to describe the novel as melodramatic, given its exaggeration of violence, suffering, and horror.

But beyond this basic conception of melodrama—as an aesthetic mode simply characterized by excess—lies a complex history dating back hundreds of years to 18th- and 19th-century European theater (C. Williams, "Tableaux," 107). Current scholarship around *A Little Life*, however, has largely ignored the historical implications of melodrama, despite frequently using the term to characterize the novel. One critic, for example, writes that *A Little Life*'s "heightened emotionality … places the novel in the literary tradition of melodrama" (Kellermann 339), while another critic notes the novel's "melodramatic elements," "melodramatic style," and "melodramatic tone" (Rushton 195, 197, 209). But both of these critics, as well as others writing about *A Little Life*, fail to elaborate any further on what exactly this literary tradition is—and beyond that, what implications follow from thinking about the novel as an instance of melodrama that explicitly engages that tradition.

Instead, emerging scholarship on *A Little Life* has taken different approaches to analyzing the novel, ranging from queer networks aesthetics to trauma theory. One literary critic, for example, has argued that the network of people in Jude's life—Willem, Malcolm, JB, Harold, etc.—illustrate the "labor of queer connection" (McBean 431). Other scholarship has analyzed *A Little Life* within the history of 20th and 21st century literary rape portrayals, as well as situated the novel within the genre of contemporary trauma fiction (Field 211-2; Kellermann 334). But few, if any scholars, have made serious attempts to place *A Little Life* in the lengthy, ever-expanding history of melodrama, or consider its importance as a contemporary text in the developing field of melodrama studies. Drawing on Peter Brooks' field-defining book *The Melodramatic Imagination*, as well as a range of other melodrama scholars, I intend to demonstrate the nuanced ways in which Yanagihara engages with a mode that has, throughout history, often been dismissed as unserious for its over-the-top nature. This paper seeks to critically analyze how *A Little Life*'s serious subject matter becomes a vehicle for interrogating the melodramatic mode and its impact on artistic creation in this contemporary moment—a moment in which, as one scholar has suggested, "melodrama is now everywhere" (Kakoudaki 311).

This essay will first explore *A Little Life*'s numerous connections to the melodramatic mode, drawing links between Yanagihara's writing and historical characteristics of melodrama as documented by roughly a half-century of interdisciplinary scholarship. I will claim Yanagihara sketches out a history of melodrama in *A Little Life*, using her four main characters' professional lives to explore the varying traits that have come to define the mode across different artistic mediums. Yanagihara does not, however, simply provide an overview of melodrama's past; she also looks forward into melodrama's future. The central argument of this thesis concerns our main character, Jude: what if we dare read his cutting as a kind of art that pushes the limits of melodrama to the body? Backed by close readings of Jude's cutting, I will propose that his daily private acts of masochism can and should be read through the lens of artistic creation, as he navigates an aesthetic realm defined by both immense pain and utopian possibility.

Drawing on queer notions of utopia developed by José Esteban Muñoz, I suggest that Jude's cutting allows him to momentarily access an otherwise impossible world where he can forget his past abusers and temporarily exist without trauma, as his present pain erases his past. In making this argument, I will touch upon multiple facets of art history ranging from the body-art movement of the 1960s and 70s, to the earlier history of the modernist closet drama originating in the 19th century. Moreover, my study of *A Little Life* will also grapple with questions about queer aesthetics, as I explore notions of normativity—and its close friend, nonnormativity—in order to more deeply and constructively connect two fundamental characteristics of the novel: queerness and melodrama. Throughout this thesis, I will remain guided by a firm belief in possibility—the possibility of forging new conceptual connections between both self-harm and art, and queerness and melodrama, as well as the possibility of reading one of *A Little Life*'s central characters through a new, artistic light.

I. Locating *A Little Life* in the Melodramatic Tradition

Before placing *A Little Life* in the complex history of melodrama, we should first identify a few quintessential examples of melodrama. Peter Brooks, for example, points to the highly emotive literature of Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, and Henry James, while later scholars have explored melodrama's presence in realms ranging from popular Hollywood cinema to early 2000s serialized television series (Brooks 198; Yang 219; L. Williams, "World and Time" 177). Indeed, TV shows like ABC's *Lost* and Fox's *24* have even been located within the tradition of melodrama given their emotional intensity and cliffhanging plots (L. Williams, "World and Time" 177). In the last 50 years, melodrama scholars have analyzed a wide variety of texts ranging from the novels of Charles Dickens to the films of Alfred Hitchcock, linking seemingly disparate works under the umbrella of melodrama studies (Brooks ix; Goldberg xiv). Although these scholars have recognized that melodrama is a "notoriously slippery term," they have nevertheless made a serious project of determining and defining the aesthetic techniques that make melodrama tick (Yang 219). Although I cannot adequately address every facet of melodrama studies in this paper, I will explore how melodrama's most prescient characteristics—characteristics that scholars have carefully traced over the last half century—manifest themselves in Yanagihara's writing.

For centuries, melodrama has been defined by a fundamental paradox: despite its "expressionistic form," in which so little goes unsaid, scholars have argued that melodrama is equally defined by what does not get articulated aloud (Brooks 56). Long before the publication of *A Little Life*, artists ranging from authors to playwrights have gradually developed a melodramatic mode in which silence often characterizes moments of extreme emotion. Brooks points to 19th-century French plays like *Le Chien de Montargis* and *La Pie voleuse* as examples of melodrama's "text of muteness" (57). He explains: "Melodrama so often, particularly in climactic moments and in extreme situations, has recourse to non-verbal means of expressing its meanings. Words … appear to be not wholly adequate to the representation of meanings, and the melodramatic message must be formulated through other registers of the sign" (Brooks 56).

Two prominent characteristics of melodrama are inextricably linked to the idea of the unsaid and silent. First, melodramas often contain a mute figure—a character who rarely speaks, thus becoming defined by their silence (Brooks 56-7). Scholars, for example, have identified characters like Eloi in *Le Chien de Montargis* or Barnaby in Dickens' 1841 novel *Barnaby Rudge* as emblems of the mute figure in melodramatic artwork (Brooks 57; C. Williams, "Stupidity and Stupefaction" 358). The quality of muteness oftentimes amplifies the emotional tension of melodrama because the mode is fundamentally about expression. Second, many melodramas contain tableaux: moments in which "acting bodies suddenly freeze to make a silent and still stage picture whose significance can be interpreted" by the viewing audience (C. Williams, "Tableaux" 101). This still stage picture profoundly impacts the spectators of theater melodrama: "Absorbed during the dramatic action, the spectator experiences a shock when the action suddenly stops in a picture. No longer absorbed, the spectator is suddenly catapulted, through shock, into a state of aesthetically distanced contemplation, when astonishment and fixation are accompanied by reflection and interpretation" (C. Williams, "Melodrama" 770). The shock of contrasts elicited by the stillness and silence of a tableau helps heighten the emotions needed for melodrama. Consider the oil painting *Melodrama* by French artist Honoré Daumier (see fig. 1) as a quintessential representation of tableau on the dramatic stage.

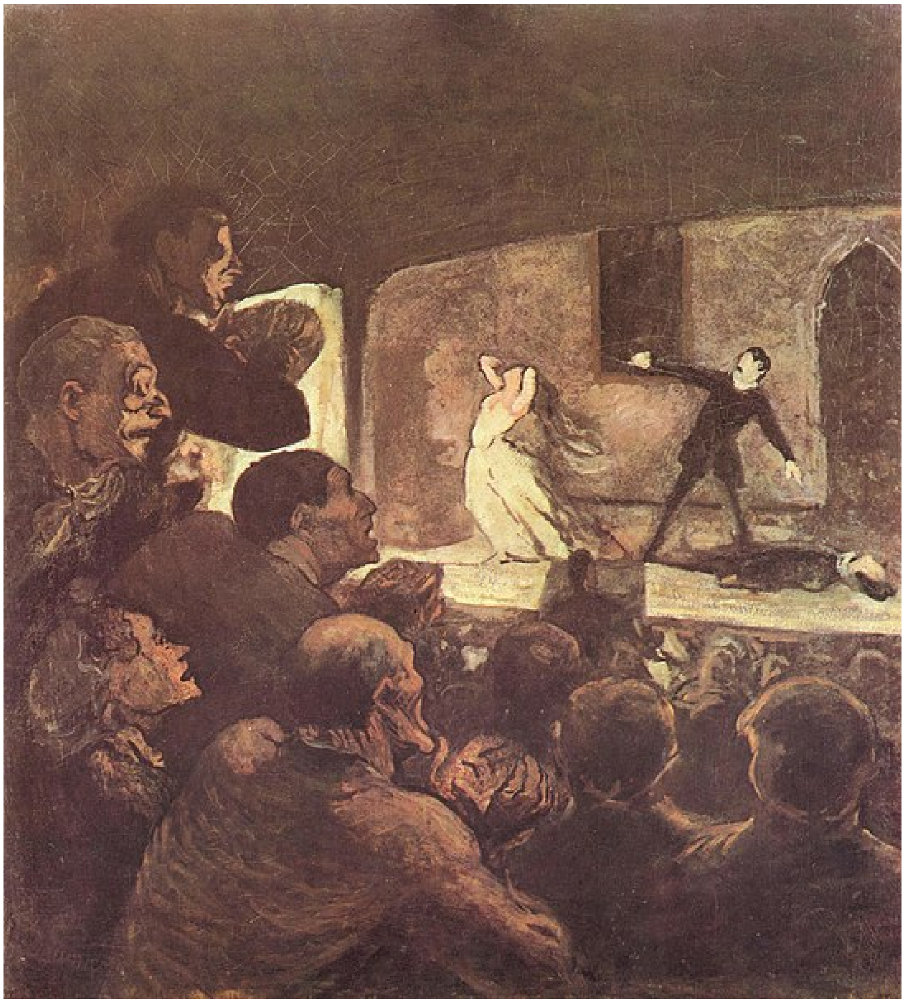

Fig. 1. Honoré Daumier. *Melodrama*. 1860, Neue Pinakothek, Munich.

Illuminated on the stage are a man and woman, frozen in action as they stand hovering above the corpse of another man. The actors convey a clear intensity of emotions, but even more apparent in this painting are the strong feelings experienced by the audience watching the actors' performance. The focal point of the painting is not so much the actors themselves, but the audience reacting to the happenings on stage. The audience members are evidently gripped by the performance they are viewing, as each one of them concentrates on the stage and silently interprets the scene before them. The potency of melodrama lies in its play with contrasts: extreme emotions are often accompanied by moments of profound speechlessness, heightening the drama of a scene by shattering any expectations that over-the-top events be accompanied by equally expressive dialogue. Instead, the audience is left to quietly make sense of the emotions they are witnessing and experiencing, as viewers interpret the theatrical gestures on the stage, page, or screen, free from any dialogue that might be laden with additional meaning.

Neither a creative eye nor adept close reading is required to identify such melodramatic moments of silence throughout *A Little Life.* The words "silence" and "quiet," as well as minor variations thereof, appear nearly 450 times—so, on average, about once every two pages. Simply put, the novel is steeped in silence. In the book's opening pages, for example—even as readers are only beginning to understand the routine physical suffering Jude endures because of childhood injuries—we bear witness to a moment of tableau when Willem silently holds his friend (and future lover). As Jude endures the pain of an old injury flaring up, Willem comforts him. This tender moment in their college dormitory, during which "Jude shuddered and chattered his teeth for hours, and eventually Willem lay down beside him and fell asleep," represents how stillness and silence—two critical characteristics of melodrama—enter the novel during a moment of heightened emotionality and suffering, when the reader is perhaps not expecting these qualities to be present in such a heated scene (22). The emotions are so extreme that dialogue becomes unfit to communicate the scene's significance to the audience, instead leaving the profound weight of silence to capture the magnitude of feeling. Yanagihara frequently plays with this sort of paradoxical stillness. When Jude experiences joy with his friends in their early twenties, he wishes that they could be forever frozen, "that none of them would have to move from that moment" (156); when Willem and Jude's physician, Andy, argue heatedly over the phone, the fight quickly devolves until "they were both silent, panting into their phones" (199); and when Jude's abusive boyfriend, Caleb, sends him flying down the stairs of his apartment, Jude "finds himself suspended in the air, between the ecstasy of being aloft and the anticipation of his landing" (297). Each of these scenes represents Yanagihara's melodramatic impulse—to emphasize silence and stillness in intense scenes filled with heightened emotions.

Furthermore, I suggest we also read Jude as a quasi-mute figure. Repeatedly, Jude appears unable to open up to his friends and family about his horrendous past because discussing this era of his life pains him greatly. His past actions—especially with Brother Luke—fill him with an immense (and unnecessary) sense of shame, so much so that he has essentially been rendered mute by his childhood trauma. Early in the text, during a brief, parenthetical aside made by the narrator, we learn that none of Jude's closest friends knows practically anything about his past before their meeting in college: "[Willem, Malcolm, and JB] had known Jude for almost a decade now and still weren't certain when or if there had ever been parents at all, only that the situation was miserable and not to be spoken of" (18). Jude's seeming reluctance—and as we later learn, inability—to disclose major parts of his past, represents another way Yanagihara engages with the melodramatic mode: this time, through the traditional "mute figure." Jude will not—and cannot—speak about his trauma during most of his life because the memories of his childhood pain him; all he wishes is to forget his past—from his early years with the abusive monks in the monastery where he grew up, to the nights with strange men in motel rooms and various stays in toxic group homes (222). Although connecting trauma with melodrama might seem to diminish the serious significance of traumatic experience, there exists an undeniable link between the two, as artists use a mode defined by aesthetic excess to communicate the overwhelming emotions associated with trauma. In fact, some scholars have even cheekily employed the phrase “melotrauma” to describe this inherent link (Gottlieb 41). In *A Little Life,* Yanagihara utilizes a key characteristic of post-traumatic stress—the inability to speak openly about one’s past—as a means of creating melodrama in her work. As one critic of early melodrama aptly writes, the mute figure “is not mute from astonishment but from damage done in the past,” adding that the “inability to speak becomes a vivid metaphor for lack of individual or social agency” (C. Williams, “Stupidity and Stupefaction” 358). Jude’s silence takes on a similar function in *A Little Life*, as his inability to discuss his past illustrates the control his abusers still have on him—even if many of them are no longer alive. The abuse Jude has endured in the past robs him of his voice in the present, as he remains unable to divulge his trauma to those closest to him throughout much of the novel. His speechlessness indicates melodrama because the silence bears a direct relation to the heightened feelings (i.e. emotional pain and suffering) he experiences. Thus, I suggest we place Jude within the expansive genealogy of mute figures that have come to signify melodrama.

I would like to pause for a moment, though, and make something abundantly clear at this point in my project: I do not intend to simply catalog the various ways Yanagihara invokes the classical characteristics of melodrama. The history of melodrama is long and complex, as scholars increasingly identify new realms the mode has touched and new qualities that define it. Instead, I am providing a brief sketch of melodrama’s history and placing Yanagihara’s writing within this history to determine what *A Little Life* can tell us about the present—and future—of melodrama as an artistic mode. As Brooks observes in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, “melodrama is by no means finished, either as outlook or as aesthetic genre” (xiv). Thus, my exploration of *A Little Life* will be grounded in considering the potentiality of melodrama. Certainly, Yanagihara embraces many of the historical components of melodrama in her writing.

But I am much more intrigued by how—and perhaps more importantly, why—Yanagihara might be pushing the limits of melodrama in this contemporary moment.

Melodrama's roots lie in a long evolutionary history: what began in 19th-century theaters soon found its way into literature, and from there, jumped to cinema and television. Scholars have pointed to everything from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to HBO's drama series *The Wire* as texts that melodrama has touched (Raub 437; L. Williams, "World and Time" 179). Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, two film scholars noted for their advances in melodrama studies, aptly explain in their introduction to a recent essay collection: "Never itself a singular genre, melodrama as a pervasive mode has functioned historically as a genre-generating machine" (5). Notice here that Gledhill and Williams refer to melodrama not as a genre but as a mode. While some scholars use the language of genre—in essence, the language of categorization—to define melodrama, I will be treating it as a "mode" because such an approach recognizes melodrama's aesthetic impact beyond any one genre or form. Melodrama is a manner, a distinct approach toward artistic creation. Put another way, melodrama is "a mode of aesthetic articulation distilled from and adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures" (Gledhill xiii).

There is great power in conceptualizing melodrama as a sort of generative machine, as Gledhill and Williams do, because this approach allows us to analyze a case study like *A Little Life* with a distinct sense of purpose: to understand more about the present state of this machine by closely examining the quality of its product. Thinking of melodrama as an ever-evolving, future-oriented mode, while simultaneously acknowledging its historical roots, allows us to explore larger questions about its influence on artistic expression. If melodrama is—to borrow the words of Brooks—an "important and abiding mode in the modern imagination" (ix), then what might *A Little Life* tell us about the state of this mode almost 50 years after Brooks' initial exploration? Moreover, what possible futures might melodrama be headed toward? In the pages ahead, I will suggest Yanagihara queers the characteristically theatrical aesthetics of melodrama by imagining Jude's cutting—an act of intense feeling he performs without an audience—as a melodramatic art form. Historically, melodrama has been contingent upon its engagement with the public sphere. Thus, I will argue that theorizing Jude's private acts of cutting as art allows for the queer possibility of nonnormative, anti-theatrical melodrama that deliberately dismantles any expectations of public engagement.

II. A Book of Artists

Hitherto, we have identified how common qualities of melodrama—silence, excess, heightened emotions—manifest themselves clearly within *A Little Life*. While prior critics have simply pointed to the novel's "melodramatic style" (Rushton 197), we have placed the novel within the history of the melodramatic mode: a mode that, significantly, refuses to limit itself to a single form, hopping from medium to medium—from theater to literature to film to television—like a contagion. It is this quality of melodrama—its seeming inability to be confined to a single art type—that I intend to discuss next. Of course, *A Little Life* is a novel; simply put, there is nothing startling or new about the presence of melodrama within a literary text. This phenomenon has been occurring for centuries, with Brooks bringing special attention to literary melodrama in 1976. I would argue, however, that within the pages of *A Little Life*, Yanagihara's implementation of melodrama extends beyond simply an aesthetics of excess. Instead, she offers a historical survey of the many mediums melodrama has mutated across, using the professional lives of the four main characters as a vehicle through which to provide readers with this overview.

Much has been said by critics about the immense, almost comical levels of success that each character experiences in their respective careers: Jude as a corporate lawyer, Willem as an actor, Malcolm as an architect, and JB as a painter. One reviewer, despite ultimately praising the text, even dismissed Yanagihara's writing as verging on "'Sex and the City'-style lifestyle porn" (Batuman). From JB's MoMA-bound paintings to Willem's "prestigious award"-winning movies, it's easy to dismiss their sheer success as another example of Yanagihara embracing the excess of melodrama (156, 501-2). In a novel where so much already feels over the top, why not just bless each character with ridiculously successful careers? I would push against this simplistic interpretation, though, and contend that the professional successes of each character serve a functional purpose: first, to sketch out an overview of melodrama's historical progression across mediums, and second, to explore questions about the artistic limits of the melodramatic mode itself.

Notably, three of the novel's four main characters pursue careers in the arts. Willem's career as an actor, for instance, directly associates him with the worlds of theater and cinema, which intriguingly, are two of the main mediums that melodrama has infected. Yanagihara dedicates pages upon pages to describing Willem's acting career. After his start waiting tables at a New York City restaurant staffed solely with aspiring actors, he eventually finds success in a variety of blockbuster roles: he plays Odysseus in remakes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as an international agent in a spy trilogy and a closeted Southern lawyer in a film titled *Sycamore Court* (39, 259, 371, 552). Admittedly, Yanagihara's descriptions of Willem's films do not provide enough information for us to precisely assess his movies as melodramatic; however, I do believe that the trajectory of Willem's career mimics the trajectory of melodrama as an artistic mode. His career begins in the theater, and then much like melodrama, evolves and eventually jumps to another artistic medium: cinema. And much like melodrama's inability to be confined to a single genre, Willem's career spans a multitude of genres as well. He perpetually evolves as an actor, taking on roles in historical, action, and drama films, for example. His increasing versatility represents the ever-expanding versatility of melodrama. Literary scholar Despina Kakoudaki describes precisely how "over the decades, a wide range of texts have been described as melodramas, from grand epics to private family stories, from action serials and thrillers to women's films and 'weepies,' from westerns to crime, action, and disaster films" (312). She further argues that "the workings and logic of melodrama have expanded their reach to such an extent that contemporary mainstream Hollywood cinema is arguably fundamentally melodramatic" (Kakoudaki 312). Following this argument, then, I suggest that Willem's successful, mainstream acting career integrates him directly into the melodrama of contemporary cinema. Although we cannot declare with certainty that each and every one of Willem's productions is melodramatic—at least based solely on Yanagihara's descriptions of his films—we can still view his career holistically as emblematic of the mutative abilities of melodrama.

Moreover, one of Willem's standout roles—as a closeted music teacher in a film titled *Duets*—ushers into the novel another historical component of melodrama: music. Music plays a crucial—even constitutive—role in the history of melodrama. According to Brooks, "the word melodrama means, originally, a drama accompanied by music" (14). At an etymological level, in fact, melodrama quite literally combines the prefix melo-, meaning music, with drama. The layering of background music into a performance amplifies emotions and adds deeper meaning to a production, Brooks says, especially during climactic scenes when characters might be silent on stage in classic melodramatic fashion. He writes: "Music seems to have been called upon whenever the dramatist wanted to strike a particular emotional pitch or coloring and lead the audience into a change or heightening of mood" (48-49). He points to Adolfe Dennery's 1841 play *La Grâce de Dieu* and Joseph Bouchardy's 1843 play *Les Enfants trouvés* as quintessential examples of melodrama's marrying of music and drama. Literary melodrama, of course, cannot combine these two things outright. As scholar Jonathan Goldberg aptly states, "all there is to see on a printed page is black marks against a white background; everything else we see and hear is not there" (Goldberg xiv). Nevertheless, that does not mean we cannot search for music on the page.

Willem's film *Duets* offers an intriguing instance of music entering *A Little Life* at a pivotal moment in the text. In the film, Willem plays the role of a closeted gay music instructor who marries a closted lesbian also teaching music at the same high school (398). Willem secures the role right as he begins his romantic relationship with Jude, and practicing for the role becomes an integral part of their daily lives together. "Every morning for the past two months, they had been singing with each other in preparation for *Duets*," Yanagihara writes. "Jude had been practicing with him: Jude took the melody, and [Willem] took the harmony" (414). Singing together becomes important during the formative days of their relationship, offering a sort of background music to their burgeoning love. Right as they learn to live together as a couple, navigating difficult conversations about sex and trauma, the two men simultaneously learn to make art together. I am struck by how Yanagihara specifically describes Willem and Jude "singing along to the *Duets* soundtrack" as they drive the streets of New York City together (454). In essence, the film's musical score also functions as the soundtrack to their romance. The influential role music plays in their relationship further emphasizes melodrama's grasp on the text. According to Brooks, "music in melodrama … marks entrances," typically, the entrances of characters (48). In *A Little Life*, the music of *Duets* does not necessarily represent a character entering a scene, as much as it represents a new, exciting stage in two of our main characters' lives. We see years of friendship slowly culminating into something more. The music of *Duets* does, in true melodramatic fashion, announce the arrival of something novel in the text: a heartfelt, tender, romantic connection for Jude—something he is completely unaccustomed to after a lifetime of toxic relationships, stretching from Brother Luke to Caleb.

Like Willem's film career, JB's painting profession also shows signs of melodrama's influence. According to melodrama scholar Carolyn Williams, "the critical history of the tableau is tightly related to genre painting" ("Tableaux" 101). She points specifically to 19th century English theater melodramas, in which the "stage picture [became] increasingly and explicitly imagined as a painting" ("Tableaux" 103). As actors freeze motionless on the stage during moments of tableau, the images created feel reminiscent of figures stagnant on a canvas. The kinetic energy of a scene becomes momentarily subdued, taking on the stillness of a painting in the viewer's eye. JB's many paintings of his friends engaged in everyday activities—like *Willem and the Girl* and *Willem and Jude, Lispenard Street, II*—possess stylistic similarities to the genre painting Williams speaks of (586). With the rise of modern life genre paintings between the 1850s and 1870s, artists embraced "the people and problems of contemporary life" as subjects in their work, crafting paintings noteworthy for their "emotional impact" (Fletcher 458). Similarly, JB crafts his own stirring tableaux, painting images that romanticize the daily lives of his closest friends. Yanagihara dedicates multiple pages to describing JB's various paintings, including pictures of Malcolm and his sister in her first apartment, and Jude grappling with a flare up of his leg injury—notably, unaware that he is being watched (152). JB's signature style—painting photographs he takes on his camera—captures the in between moments of everyday life in beautiful hues. Like still images interspersed throughout a drama, JB's photographs create still images amid the ceaseless action of his subjects' busy lives, which he then translates into paint.

Additionally, JB's painting series are often characterized by the kind of excess emblematic of melodrama. One of his shows, creatively titled "Everyone I've Ever Known

Everyone I've Ever Loved Everyone I've Ever Hated Everyone I've Ever Fucked," quite literally takes on the moumental task of painting every person JB has known, loved, hated, and fucked (236). This includes some of his closest friends, such as Jude and Willem. This ambitious project culminates with "a hundred and fifty fifteen-by-twenty-two-inch paintings on thin pieces of board of the faces of everyone he had ever known" (236). JB's enterprise embraces exaggeration, proclaiming to take on the (certainly impossible) task of documenting everyone in his life, ever. Here, we see the over-the-top spirit of melodrama alive and well in JB's art. The almost comically ambitious nature of his project—and its inherent infeasibility, for how can someone truly catalog every person they have ever known?—feels in line with what one scholar has described as melodrama's "aesthetics of impossibility" (Goldberg xv). JB's paintings—despite possessing modest, even mundane titles like *Jude with Cigarette* and *Malcolm and Flora, Bethune Street*—frequently flirt with the impossible. Yanagihara describes JB's shocking "ability to produce colors and images that made all other colors and images seem wan and flaccid in comparison," as if he had achieved the impossible task of "invent[ing] a different language of color altogether" (152). In this description, we see the sheer power of JB's art—his ability to turn the unremarkable moments of daily life into something extraordinary. There's something beautifully implausible about JB's art and the career it affords him—that simple portraits of his friends and family could somehow be so spectacular as to one day be worthy of a multi-floor retrospective at the Whitney museum (585-7). Ultimately, I would argue that throughout JB's artistic career we can see the notion of impossibility being repeatedly invoked, whether it be in shows like "Everyone I've Ever Known," or through the sheer existence of such a miraculous career.

Admittedly, Malcolm's art is more difficult to pinpoint within the history of melodrama: architecture is not an artistic medium commonly considered as one touched by melodrama.

Melodrama scholars have primarily concentrated their studies on theater, literature, film, and television. Nevertheless, the world of architecture is not immune from melodrama's reach. Heath Schenker, a scholar of landscape architecture, proposes in his book *Melodramatic Landscapes* that urban parks around the world, from New York to Paris to Mexico City, functioned as stages for visitors to perform their social status during the 19th century (20). He deftly explains: "Melodramas in the theater gained popularity in this period and in a parallel development, new public spaces in nineteenth-century cities, such as theaters, shops, restaurants, and parks, all became important stages for public performances of individual social identity as well as performances of collective civic and cultural identity" (144). Large urban parks, Schenker argues, were part of city landscapes constructed in such a way that they became open-air theaters of sorts (146-7). While melodramas grew in popularity in playhouses across 1800s Europe, city parks simultaneously became stages for citizens to engage in the drama of daily life. Malcolm's architectural creations, I believe, serve a similar role as theatrical space.

One of Malcolm's most prominent architectural feats in *A Little Life* is his renovation of Jude's apartment on Greene Street. Yanagihara spends enough pages detailing Malcolm's remodeling of the apartment that readers would be forgiven for at times thinking of it more as Malcolm's abode than Jude's. Even Jude concedes that the Greene Street apartment has essentially become Malcolm's domain: "He enjoys watching Malcolm work [on the remodel], is touched that he has spent so much time—more than he himself has—thinking about how he might live" (223). Malcolm plans out, blueprint after blueprint, exactly how to design the Greene Street apartment, until finally "[Jude] has enough saved for Malcolm to indulge even his most outlandish design fantasies. Now he has enough for every piece of furniture Malcolm has ever suggested he might get, for every carpet and vase" (223-4). A closer look at these brief excerpts reveals an intriguing connection between Malcolm's architecture and melodrama, a connection that might go unnoticed upon initial glance: Malcolm's architectural style is characterized by excess. Within the walls of the Greene Street apartment, he wishes to enact "his most outlandish design fantasies," filling the apartment with "every piece of furniture [he] has ever suggested [Jude] might get" (223-4). Such maximalism embodies the very spirit of melodrama. Malcolm clearly embraces an aesthetic of excess in his construction of Jude's living space, similar to how JB embraces excess in his "Everyone I've Ever Known" project. In short, Malcolm's approach to planning and building Jude's apartment resists restraint, instead using the space as a realm to indulge his greatest design dreams.

Malcolm's architecture, however, has an even deeper connection to melodrama: the apartment on Greene Street, a space shaped by Malcolm's artistic vision, also functions as a stage on which many of the novel's most significant scenes take place. Similar to the melodramatic landscape of urban parks, the Greene Street apartment is constructed in such a way that it feels theater-like. For example, Yanagihara repeatedly emphasizes the expansive windows that stretch throughout the apartment, describing how "you could open them all at once and the space would feel like a rectangle of pure light, the veil between you and the outside world mesmerizingly thin" (278). The idea of the "veil" demarcating public from private, outside from inside, conjures the image of the proscenium that divides the audience from the stage in a theater. For someone as guarded as Jude, the Greene Street apartment represents a place of privacy and safety, being that it's his own home—but paradoxically, it's also a space where the presence of the public gaze never feels far off, where every action feels like a potential performance.

On this perfectly-lit stage, many of the novel's most harrowing, over-the-top moments occur, such as when Jude's abusive boyfriend, Caleb, sexually assaults him. Yanagihara describes precisely the way Caleb harms Jude within the setting of his own apartment: "He drags [Jude] to the sofa, the only sounds Caleb's steady breaths and his frantic gulps. He pushes his face into the cushions and holds his head down with one hand, while with the other, he begins pulling off his clothes" (295). The emphasis on the sofa in this scene is worth noting: if the Greene Street apartment figures as a kind of theater, then the sofa functions as a prop, hand-selected by Malcolm, that will facilitate Caleb's violation of Jude. As the novel unfolds, the Greene Street apartment repeatedly stages some of the text's most horrific scenes, from Jude's many nights cutting himself to his ultimate suicide. In essence, Malcolm designs the stage on which much of Jude's adult life occurs.

Later in the novel, Malcolm also builds Jude and Willem's country house in Garrison, which possesses many of the same stage-like qualities as the apartment on Greene Street. Yanagihara again carefully details the architecture of the house, explaining how "the new house [is] a single level and mostly glass," and "at night, when it is lit, it glows like a lantern" (434, 516). Once more, these descriptions conjure the imagery of a perfectly-lit theater; the transparent house functions as a stage on which Jude and Willem's later years play out. As they perform the routines of domesticity together, their life remains on full display for the outside world to see. According to Peter Brooks, "melodrama at heart represents the theatrical impulse itself," and I would argue that within the world of *A Little Life*, this is the impulse of Malcolm's architecture—to create a theater for Jude's life. In short, Malcolm's artistic craft—just like Willem and JB's—has been touched by melodrama. What strikes me about each of these men's distinct art forms is how they fit together in relation to one another. While the architect (Malcolm) creates space for melodrama by crafting a set with props, the actor (Willem) performs on the set while the painter (JB) captures still images of the performance. Thus, their respective art forms unite to facilitate stage melodrama. But where exactly does that leave Jude?

Jude is the only person in his friend group who does not pursue a career in the arts, instead committing himself to the field of corporate law. At first glance, he stands out amongst the group of creatives, and Yanagihara's positioning him as such begs an important question: does Jude have an art form? If Willem is an actor, JB is a painter, and Malcolm is an architect, what kind of art does Jude create? And perhaps more importantly, has his art also been touched by melodrama? Answering these questions, we shall soon see, requires us to stretch—even reconceptualize—what we consider art in the first place.

One reason we might encounter some difficulty pinpointing Jude's art form is because he possesses a multitude of artistic skills throughout the novel. When he works at a bakery during college, he decorates pastries with such artistry that it earns him praise from numerous customers (106). He also approaches his study of mathematics, in which he obtains a masters degree while at law school, with a similarly astounding sense of creativity. Jude repeatedly describes mathematics as "beautiful," explaining that "pure math doesn't exist to provide immediate, or necessarily obvious, practical applications. It's purely an expression of form, if you will" (111). Mathematics, at least in Jude's eyes, contains a sense of artistry: its practitioners are concerned with beauty and form, akin to how a sculptor might be when carving a statue, or a painter when crafting a portrait. However, Jude's artistic abilities are not just limited to baking and mathematics; in the spirit of excess, Yanagihara also grants him immense vocal talent. On one occasion, a judge he clerks for even asks Jude to sing on the spot for him, earning a hearty round of applause and repeated exclamations of "Bravo!" (99). Nevertheless, I believe we may face some difficulty asserting that any of these art forms—baking, mathematics, or singing—are Jude's preeminent artistic mode. His livelihood is not defined by these artistic endeavors in the same way that Willem, Malcolm, and JB's lives are defined by acting, painting, and architectural design. So what does define him?

Instinctually, and for the sake of simplicity, we might feel compelled to read Jude's legal career as some sort of artistic endeavor—to find art where initially there does not seem to be any.

His legal work does concern itself with the art world at times, as he volunteers at a nonprofit providing free legal advice to artists (214). However, Jude's desire to practice law is not fundamentally driven by a longing to uncover hidden beauty in the legal code. Instead, his desire to be a lawyer is much more pragmatic: "He wanted to have the means to protect himself; … he wanted to make sure no one could ever reach him again" (111). In essence, Jude practices law to achieve a sense of safety—safety from his past, from the people who traumatized him as a child. Jude's legal craft certainly is "nourishing to him," and as Harold notes, "he [finds] pleasure in it" (307). But being a lawyer, first and foremost, means safety in Jude's eyes, not some mode of artistic expression. Therefore, in order to truly determine the kind of art Jude creates, we must look beyond his career. In fact, we must drastically expand what we even deem to be art.

Jude spends much of *A Little Life* caught in a cycle of self-harm. He first learns to cut himself from Brother Luke, the pedophilic monk who traffics Jude as a child. As they travel the country together, migrating from motel to motel, Brother Luke teaches Jude how to "relieve his frustrations" using "razors and alcohol wipes and cotton and bandages" (365). Cutting becomes an escape for Jude, a way to cope with the traumas of daily life. "When he did it, it was as if he was draining away the poison, the filth, the rage inside him. It was as if his old dream of leeches had come to life and had the same effect, the effect he had always hoped it would" (365). Yanagihara's descriptions of Jude's cutting are beautiful in their own right: steeped in metaphor, her prose turns the violence Jude routinely inflicts upon his own body into art. Jude's body becomes a canvas for *her* art. She repeatedly conjures the kind of haunting imagery that straddles the line between grotesque and sublime, as she describes Jude's ceaseless desire to self-harm: "He had a vision in which he carved away at himself," Yanagihara writes. "First arms, then legs, then chest and neck and face—until he was only bones, a skeleton who moved and sighed and breathed and tottered through life on its porous, brittle stalks" (170). As I have previously mentioned, numerous readers of *A Little Life* have taken issue with its aestheticization of self-harm, criticizing Yanagihara's attempts to depict Jude's cutting in a fashion that is somehow aesthetically compelling—albeit overwhelming—for readers. I would assert, however, that there exists a secondary, even more ethically ambiguous conversation worth having—one that stretches beyond simply asking *if* Yanagihara's depictions of self-harm are beautiful in a literary sense. Throughout the many cutting scenes in *A Little Life*, Yanagihara explores a deeper question around the aestheticization of self-harm: can cutting, as well as other forms of self-harm, be considered art? Not just *depictions* of self-harm, but the actual act itself. Could we perhaps read Jude's cutting as his true art form, level with JB's painting, Willem's theater, and Malcolm's architecture?

III. Jude, the Artist

Yanagihara repeatedly emphasizes three distinct qualities in her descriptions of Jude's self-harm: craft, color, and his own aesthetic interest in his wounds. Her clear focus on these elements, I will argue, ultimately positions Jude's cutting as another form of artistic expression within the novel. Consider, for example, the following account of Jude learning to self-harm: "When he had begun cutting himself, he cut on his legs—just the calves—and before he learned to be organized about how he applied them, he swiped the blade across the skin in haphazard strokes" (267). Like a painter developing his craft, Jude practices cutting so frequently that he develops a specific routine and technique for harming himself. His cuts are deliberate, and quite ritualistic, as he becomes concerned with how they will be patterned on his skin after he finishes. In essence, Jude develops aesthetic concerns with how exactly the scars will appear on his skin: his craft prioritizes order over disarray, structure over chaos. The razor blade is a violent paint brush, leaving “haphazard strokes” on the blank canvas of Jude’s skin until he refines his craft and “learn[s] to be organized” (267). In fact, Jude possesses an entire artistic toolkit that facilitates his self-harm. Whereas a painter like JB might have a specialized set of brushes and an easel, Jude has his notorious bag “packed with razors and alcohol wipes and cotton and bandages” (365). These tools allow him to cut himself, disinfect his wounds, and bandage them up so they scar properly. Process is vital to Jude’s masochistic art practice, as he slices himself with precision day after day after day.

Elsewhere in the novel, Yanagihara details how Jude must adapt his artistic methods because of the toll cutting takes on his body “He has long ago run out of blank skin on his forearms, and he now recuts over old cuts, using the edge of the razor to saw through the tough, webby scar tissue: when the new cuts heal, they do so in warty furrows, and he is disgusted and dismayed and fascinated all at once by how severely he has deformed himself” (263). As the “blank” canvas of Jude’s skin becomes hardened with time, he has to reinvent his practice and develop new techniques in order to continue creating his art. This focus on the craft-like nature of Jude’s cutting—specifically, his concern regarding the form of his cuts—pushes us toward viewing self-harm as a kind of artistic practice for Jude: it is an extreme method of self-expression that fills him with disgust and dismay and fascination, “allow[ing] him to drain everything toxic and spoiled from himself” (426). Cutting allows Jude to grapple with the shame of his childhood, offering him a way to respond to his trauma without needing to speak about it openly. “It was a form of punishment and also of cleansing,” Yanagihara writes. “It kept him from shouting, from violence” (426). Jude develops self-harming practices that allow him to negotiate the intense emotions his trauma inspires, much like how artists operating in the melodramatic mode have developed techniques (i.e. tableaux, the “mute figure,” etc.) to convey the heightened feelings in their art. Quiet is also an integral part Jude’s craft, as he explicitly cuts to “[keep] him from shouting,” typically inflicting pain upon himself in the silence of his own bathroom. In the mute manner of melodrama, Jude looks for alternate forms of expression as he works silently through his trauma.

Beyond Jude’s meticulous, craft-like approach to self-injury, his masochism also invites color into his life. On multiple occasions, Yanagihara emphasizes the hues of Jude’s self-inflicted wounds. When Jude first throws himself against walls as a child, his left side becomes “permanently stained blue and purple and brown with bruises” (173). Jude practices this form of self-harm before Brother Luke teaches him to cut in the motel rooms they spend countless nights in together. When Jude does learn how to cut, Yanagihara describes in great detail the colors of his injuries. Bruised purples and blues are followed by increasingly vibrant shades. “The blood was viscous, more gelatinous than liquid, and a brilliant, shimmering oil-black,” she writes about one of his self-inflicted wounds (342). She details how Jude “watch[es] the porcelain stain itself crimson” as he cuts in the privacy of his Greene Street bathroom, “holding his arms over the bathtub” (257). Notice the vibrancy of the colors used to describe Jude’s wounds. These blues, purples, browns, oil-blacks, and crimsons stand in stark contrast to the more muted moments of Jude’s daily adult life, when oftentimes “everything … seemed to fade into a gray watercolor wash” (128). Jude invites vibrancy into his life through pain, his acts of self-harm ushering color straight into a story that frequently feels overwhelmed by gray (readers need not look further than *A Little Life*’s cover to solidify this impression). This emphasis on colors, I would argue, reinforces the notion that Jude’s cutting is his personal art form. The “viscous,” “brilliant, shimmering oil-black” of Jude’s blood feels eerily reminiscent of how one might describe paint, and the “blue and purple and brown” of his bruises call to mind the swirl of colors on a painter’s palette. However, Jude’s body acts as a canvas not only for himself, but also Yanagihara: she treats his body like a blank slate on which she can inflict endless pain, crafting a character so brutalized and so traumatized that self-harm becomes his only means of survival. She swirls together one horrific experience after another, until we are left with a portrait of a man so damaged that healing becomes impossible.

Furthermore, Jude's fascination with the appearance of his cuts suggests a personal interest in the aesthetics of his wounds. Multiple times throughout the novel, Yanagihara describes Jude's visual obsession with his cuts—they are not just something he wants to feel, but something he desires to see. Here is just one scene of Jude's cutting that demonstrates this desire:

> He had begun a new method of balancing the edge of the blade on his skin and then pressing down, as deep as he could, so that when he withdrew the razor—stuck like an ax head into a tree stump—there was half a second in which he could pull apart the two sides of flesh and *see* only a clean white gouge, like a side of fatted bacon, before the blood began rushing in to pool within the cut. (170; emphasis added)

This longing that Jude possesses—to see his cuts, the severed flesh and blood flowing—shows how he approaches cutting with aesthetic considerations. He manipulates his cuts, prying the gashes open with his fingers in order to get a better view of them—of his body naturally at work as blood hurries to fill the wound. He wants to appreciate the cuts as he makes them, to perceive their beauty. Certainly, Jude's primary reason for cutting is to cope with childhood trauma; however, he also shows a fascination with the visual qualities of the incisions he creates. Simply put, he enjoys watching his body perform its natural function—the free flow of blood from a wound—when confronted with the unnatural presence of a blade dragging across his skin.

The aesthetics of Jude's self-harm represent—in the truest sense of the word aesthetic—a profound unification between sight and sensation. He both sees and feels each cut he creates, simultaneously. We cannot separate Jude's visual interest in his cuts from the physical feelings they inspire. For example, when Jude switches to cutting on his triceps after he runs out of untouched forearm skin, the act was “somehow less satisfying; he liked to see the cuts as he made them without twisting his neck” (28). Essentially, Jude desires to view his wounds because the satisfaction they bring him is closely intertwined with sight. The above quote illustrates the aesthetic characteristics of Jude’s cuts: the experience of cutting is both an act of feeling and an act of seeing, with Jude being both the artist and sole audience of his work. Arguably, Jude’s self-harm represents the purest merger of art and emotion. Each cut is a visual work that simultaneously floods Jude, the artist, with an overwhelming intensity of sensation.

The implications of reading Jude’s self-harm as art become more apparent when situated within the framework of melodrama studies. Recall the following proclamation by Peter Brooks: “Melodrama is by no means finished, either as outlook or as aesthetic genre” (xiv). Melodrama is perpetually evolving, bouncing from one artistic medium to the next—from painting to theater to literature to cinema to television. It represents a realm of aesthetic possibility in which the limits remain still unknown. Where exactly are the bounds of melodrama’s excess, and what lies beyond them? Melodrama, in the words of one critic, is “a form steadily expanding its register, multiplying its varieties, and broadening its range” (Buckley, “Early English Melodrama” 16). It’s a mode that has enchanted audiences across centuries and artistic mediums. Succinctly put, growth defines melodrama. A whole league of scholars have remarked upon melodrama’s tendency toward evolution, its seeming inability to remain stagnant as an aesthetic mode. Thus, we must ask ourselves: what form will melodrama—with its fervent embrace of heightened feeling—touch in the future?

Yanagihara, I would argue, directly engages with ongoing questions about the limits of melodrama. She is interested in exploring the limits of excess. In interviews, she has made these intentions quite clear:

> I wanted there to be something too much about the violence in the book, but I also wanted there to be an exaggeration of everything, an exaggeration of love, of empathy, of pity, of horror. I wanted everything turned up a little too high. I wanted it to feel a little bit vulgar in places. Or to be always walking that line between out and out sentimentality and the boundaries of good taste. I wanted the reader to really press up against that as much as possible and if I tipped into it in a couple of places, well, I couldn't really stop it. (Adams)

Notice how Yanagihara regards the process of writing *A Little Life* almost like an experiment. To her, the act of writing represents a conscious act of probing the limits of excess, and by extension, the limits of melodrama. She actively embraces the "too much," desiring to push her readers up against the boundaries of comfort, all in the name of art. As she describes in that same interview, "One of the things my editor and I did fight about … is the idea of how much a reader can take. To me you get nowhere second guessing how much can a reader stand and how much can she not. What a reader can always tell is when you are holding back for fear of offending them" (Adams). In her exploration of melodrama, Yanagihara actively eschews the concerns of her potential audience in order to access an emotional register that rejects restraint, while paradoxically gaining a heightened sense of authenticity. Art for Yanagihara, it appears, is first and foremost an emotional enterprise.

This approach is not unlike Jude's approach to his own art form. Jude turns to cutting out of a simple desire to feel something: "to feel that bright, startling slap of pain," and "feel like his body, his life, was truly his and no one else's" (360, 426). Cutting as an art form prioritizes raw feeling over all else, very much in line with melodrama's tendency towards excess and heightened emotions. Thus, I would argue Yanagihara dares to imagine self-harm as the next step in the natural jump between artistic mediums that has long characterized the progression of melodrama. Brooks describes the very purpose of melodrama as being "a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience" (xiii). In line with this idea, Jude's self-harm creates an aesthetic system built cut upon cut, through which he is able to simultaneously express himself and negotiate his childhood trauma. Consequently, Jude's cutting can be directly placed in melodrama's trajectory from painting to theater to literature to film to television, as the human body itself—the surface of one's skin—becomes the medium on which art is created. Often practiced by Jude in the utter silence of his bathroom, his cutting spurs a heightened sense of feeling—a pain so sharp and so pure—that no other art form can rival its intensity. Yanagihara envisions an art form that is so over-the-top and so intense that it attacks one's corporeal being, leading to the self-destruction of the artist himself. Jude's self-injury pushes meaningfully against the existential limits of the melodramatic mode as we know it.

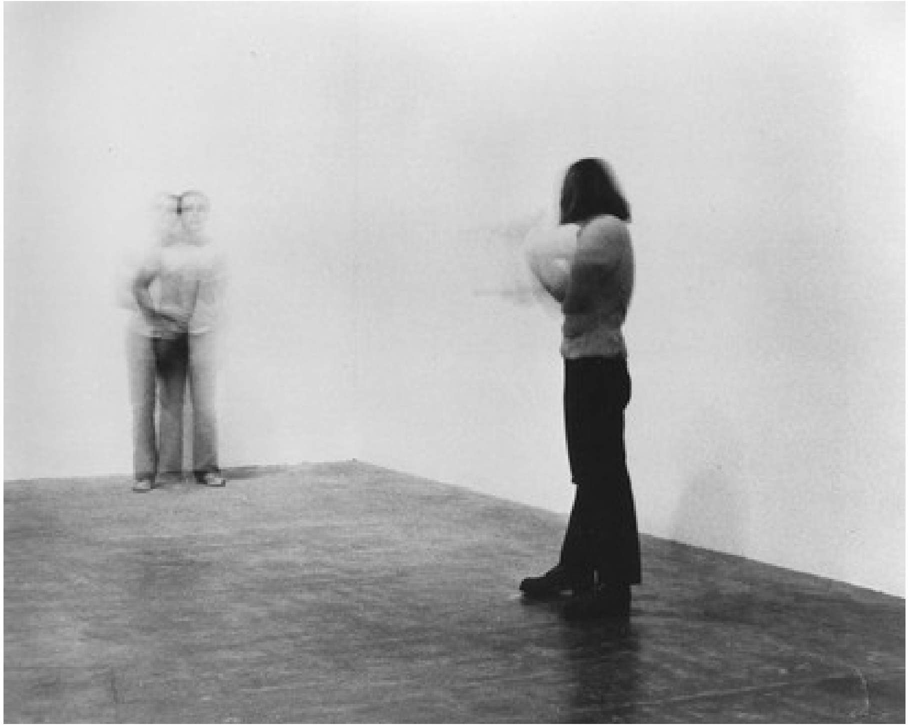

Fig. 2. Chris Burden. *Shoot*. 1971, F-Space gallery, Santa Ana.

Of course, Yanagihara is not the first to conceptualize masochism as an aesthetic act. In the 1960s, a group of performance artists emerged that radically transformed their bodies into sites of artistic creation. Performance pieces like Chris Burden's infamous *Shoot* (1971), in which the artist permits someone to shoot him in the arm (see fig. 2), and Marina Abramovićs *Rhythm 0* (1974) epitomize the self-destructive spirit of the so-called "body art" movement (O'Dell 1). In her book *The Art of Cruelty,* poet and scholar Maggie Nelson provides a compelling account of Abramovićs *Rhythm 0*, a standout piece of body art. Nelson writes:

> *Rhythm 0*, which Abramović performed only once, has the artist stand motionless for six hours, with seventy-two objects laid out on a nearby table for the audience members to use on her body in any way they see fit; the first item on the list is "Gun." (Other items: a needle, a scalpel, a knife, plus others whose relative benevolence has kept them out of legend: a rose, olive oil, a feather, and so on). … [T]he violations of Abramovićs body begin slowly, then pick up speed. By the end of the performance, her clothes have been cut off, her body burned, sliced, and decorated. Eventually a man holds the loaded gun to her head and tries to make her fire it, at which point some audience members intervene to stop him. (Nelson 76-7)

In Nelson's account of *Rhythm 0*, the destruction of Abramovićs body becomes a perverted performance that tests the limits of restraint. First, the artist's self-control is tested as she stands still for six hours in the face of repeated physical violation, and second, the restraint of the audience members themselves is tested as they grow increasingly comfortable violating the artist's body. The destruction of the human body becomes an aesthetic act, not unlike Jude's own cutting in *A Little Life*. Multiple scholars have interrogated the aesthetics of self-injury in recent years. For example, gender theorist Jack Halberstam describes cutting as a "feminist aesthetic" practice in his book *The Queer Art of Failure* (135), and in her book *Contract with the Skin*, art historian Kathy O'Dell argues that masochism can translate feelings of "senselessness, alienation, imbalance, and numbness into something constructive" (83). In essence, the destruction of one's own physical form becomes reimagined as a generative aesthetic act.

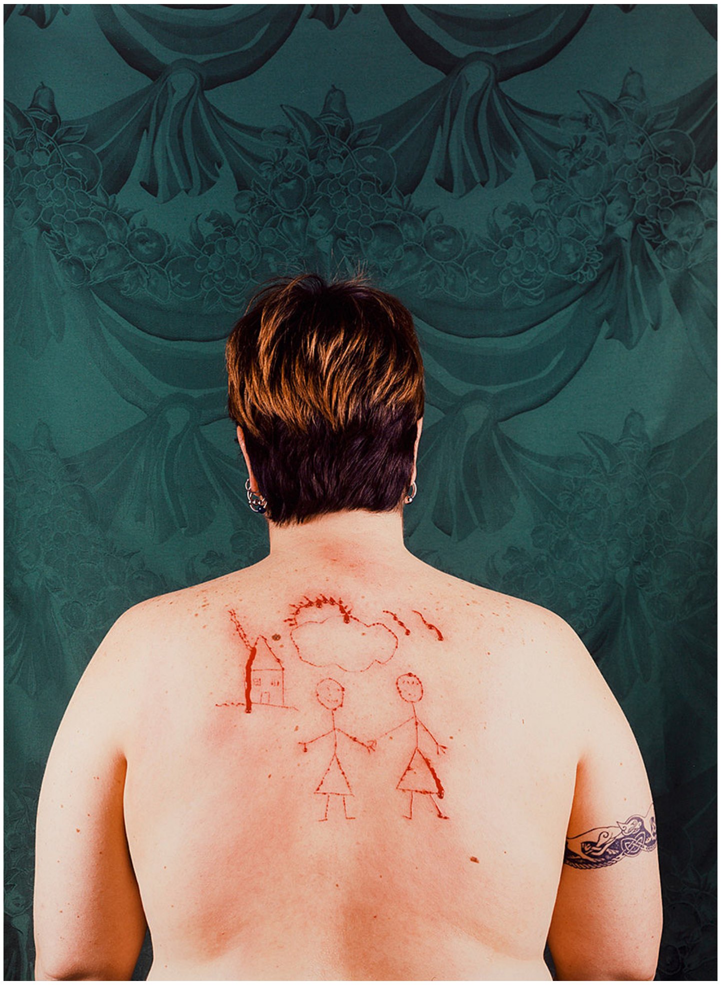

Fig. 3. Catherine Opie. *Self-Portrait/Cutting*. 1993, Guggenheim Museum, New York.

At the tail end of the body art movement, American photographer Catherine Opie serves as a uniquely compelling example of how artists—especially queer artists—have used self-harm in their artistic practice. Her photograph "Self-Portrait/Cutting" (see fig. 3) shows Opie with multiple bloody slits in her back in the shape of two women and a house, representing a smiley lesbian couple holding hands. The photograph gestures towards well-known sadomasochistic practices present in various queer subcultures. Opie challenges us to consider the possibility that inflicting pain on one's body could render something beautiful: an image of queer domesticity. Intriguingly, both Opie's "Self-Portrait/Cutting" and Abramovićs *Rhythm 0* embrace the prospect of spectatorship. For Abramović, her violent performance relies directly on an audience interacting with her body. The same is true for Opie, who must rely on a partner to inflict the wounds on her back. Moreover, the act of photographing her cuts allows her masochism to be reprinted, distributed, and viewed by a mass audience. However, this embrace of spectatorship—of bringing others into the process of self-injury—sets Abramović and Opie in stark contrast with Jude, who only ever cuts alone. Building off the history of the body art movement, we will now explore how Jude's cutting is distinct as an act of melodrama in its fracturing of conventional expectations of spectatorship and theatricality that have long-defined the mode.

IV. Queering the Limits of Melodrama

Jude's art form stands out amongst other mediums of melodrama because he actively rejects an audience. He hides his art from almost everyone in the novel, instead performing solely for himself. "In all his decades of cutting himself," Yanagihara writes, "he had never been witnessed in the act itself" (428). His self-harm runs directly counter to normative assumptions of what art is and can be. Jude's cutting eschews any expectations that art must be made for the consumption of others. He values privacy over performance, concealing his cutting—and the past that has led him down this path of self-harm—from nearly everyone else in his life. He creates art intended only to stimulate his own feelings as an artist, not an external audience's. This disdain for an audience, I believe, stems from the fact that so much of Jude's pain in life has been caused by external actors—such as Brother Luke, Dr. Taylor, and Caleb. When he cuts, he has a sense of autonomy over his own body, allowing himself to produce feelings that are solely within his control. He becomes the perpetrator of his own violence, and no longer directly the victim of other's. But in doing so, his art form disregards that which is often so integral to melodrama: the spectator.

Historically, the very essence of melodrama has been closely intertwined with the emotional experience of a viewing audience. In the words of one scholar, "emotional events both on stage and as audience experience" are integral to "melodrama's structure" (Pribram 241). If we recall Daumier's *Melodrama* oil painting, the mode depends on observers registering the heightened emotions of an artwork, and in turn, experiencing a responsive wave of feelings. Yanagihara, however, conceptualizes an art form that strains the limits of melodrama as we know it through the inherent audiencelessness of Jude's performance. What happens when we remove—or in the case of Jude, actively reject—an audience? Does the melodrama disappear? Or does a new form of melodrama appear, one that can exist without the constraints of an audience? Is this melodrama, perhaps, in its purest form? Yanagihara interrogates such complex questions, I believe, in her positioning of cutting as Jude's art form. Cutting—in line with other melodramatic artworks—revels in heightened feeling, but now, these feelings are only for the artist himself. Not only has Yanagihara already extended melodrama by moving it to the body, she also pushes its limits by considering questions of audience and theatricality.

Yanagihara's pushing of these limits, I would suggest, demonstrates a queering of the melodramatic mode. Framing our discussion within the context of queer studies will aid us in illuminating the import of Jude's audienceless art. In my discussion of queerness, I align myself with scholars who use queer "more as a verb than a noun," assuming a critical approach "that is skeptical of existing identity categories and more interested in understanding the production of normativity and its queer companion, nonnormativity" (Somerville 2). Put another way, I subscribe to the notion "that queer approaches help us understand normativity in any sense," and intend to move beyond a conception of queerness that remains tethered solely to sexual orientation and gender identity (Somerville 2). Thus, when I suggest that *A Little Life* queers melodrama, I am also suggesting that melodrama has assumed a normative stance in our contemporary culture. Understandably, such a suggestion might be met with push back from some critics. Melodrama is an aesthetic mode that has "long [been] coded as queer" because of its excess and exaggeration, often placed alongside comparably theatrical aesthetics like camp and grand opera (Greenwell). In recent years, however, a proliferation of melodrama has unfolded in front of our very eyes. As we have noted, a variety of mainstream art—ranging from novels and reality television, to computer games and pop songs—has been touched by melodrama (Buckley, "Unbinding Melodrama" 16). Arguably, it has become the dominant narrative mode of our modern time, as "melodrama is now everywhere" (Priberam 311). This widespread proliferation of melodrama has lent it an air of normativity, as its over-the-top theatrics have become media standard. The typically queer associations with melodrama as over-the-top, exaggerated performance have since become normative. I would be so bold as to claim that melodrama has become fundamentally un-queered in many respects, because its characteristic quality of "acting out" is now the norm (Brooks xi). But Jude's anti-theatricality resists this normativity: his art still embraces the heightened sensations characteristic of melodrama, but he shirks the need for an audience to register his performance. Instead, he finds comfort in the solitary nature of his artistic process.

To better understand the significance of Jude's audienceless aesthetic, I suggest we once again turn to where this essay began: the history of theater. Until now, we have been invested specifically in tracing the history of melodrama, from its origins in 18th- and 19th-century European theater to the popular films and television of today. Parallel to this development, however, lies another theatrical form that also saw great growth in the late 1800s and early 1900s: the modernist closet drama. The term closet drama, as defined by literary critic Martin Puchner in his book *Stage Fright*, describes a play not meant to be performed on a stage; instead, "the closet drama … has given up on the audience entirely" (13). He frames the emergence of closet dramas within the context of a hostile attitude toward theatricality that arose within modernism, pointing to writers Stéphane Mallermé, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein as key figures in this transgressive history (2, 16). Such writers were responding directly to an ongoing embrace and expansion of theatricality during the time period, as epitomized by the grandiose, highly emotive works of Richard Wagner (8-9). Puchner argues that anti-theatricalism represents "a variety of attitudes through which the theater is being kept at arm's length and, in the process of resistance, utterly transformed" (2). Anti-theatrical closet dramas challenge the exaggerated, excessively dramatic spirit of most popular theater, and in the process, revolutionize drama entirely through their queer embrace of audiencelessness. According to Puchner, "modernist anti-theatricalism can be seen as one reaction to [the] fear of the masses and the public sphere" (9). In essence, the anti-theatrical ethos of the closet drama signifies a broader modernist disdain for the public—a disdain, I believe, we can find parallels with in Jude's masochistic art form.

Although Jude's approach to self-harm varies in technique, his desire to hurt himself in private—whether by cutting, scratching, or burning—remains constant. "Jude's nighttime punishments," as Willem calls his friend's cutting, almost always happen behind "a locked bathroom door" (69). In essence, much like the closet drama that deliberately shirks the public sphere, Jude prefers to create his art alone, free from the prying gaze of an audience. He practices his craft behind the privacy of a locked door, in a closet of his own creation. He puts on "horrible, grotesque play[s] … night after night after night," making cut after cut after cut upon his skin (459). At one point later in the novel, Yanagihara even utilizes a metaphor comparing Jude's cutting to a drama production to highlight the anti-theatrical implications of his cutting. "Even when there is no audience," she writes, "the play is staged anyway to an empty house, its sole performer so diligent and dedicated that nothing can prevent him from practicing his craft" (459). In this quote, we see Jude partaking in an utterly private aesthetic act—the transformation of his own skin—which he performs solely in service of his own heightened sensation. We see how Jude's anti-theatrical endeavor—deliberately eschewing the eyes of an audience—rejects the very "theatrical impulse" that has historically defined melodrama (Brooks xi). The "empty house" represents a key tension point in the text: if "emotions and the public sphere are closely intertwined" in melodrama (Pribram 244), what happens to the mode when the artist rejects the public sphere entirely, avoiding an audience at all costs?

Drawing parallels with closet dramas, I believe, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the audienceless nature of Jude's art. In *Stage Fright*, Puchner asserts that "closet dramas … withdraw from the public not so much to celebrate narcissistically their own autonomy but to resist the particular forms of normativity they associate with theatrical representation" (16). He deftly argues that "the closet drama's resistance to the theater does not signify a purely negative retreat into an aestheticist sphere of *l'art pour l'art*. Rather, this resistance is part of a larger resistance to the limitations of the theater and the normativity that stems from them" (90). Essentially, the private performances of closet dramatists do not exist solely for the purpose of achieving aesthetic autonomy, but instead to probe the boundaries of theater itself. Mallermé, Joyce, and Stein—as well as Jude—do not reject an audience simply because they believe it will free them to create art for art's sake. The rejection of an audience, instead, represents a rejection of the overbearing normativity of theater—a rejection of the impulse to exaggerate, to act out for others. This embrace of nonnormativity signifies a queering of theater—a forceful refusal of the overbearing reign of theatricality.

Similarly, Jude's self-harm—and consequently, his embrace of an audienceless aesthetic—represents a repudiation of the normative theatricality of melodrama. For many years, melodrama's "aesthetics of expressionism" (Pribram 245) were considered anything but normative, as critics bristled at the mode's penchant for excess and acting out. In our contemporary moment, however, "melodrama … underpins most forms of American popular culture" (Pribram 244). The ubiquity of melodrama truly cannot be understated. Now, the "melodramatic mode's distinctive theatricality" (Hadley 4) has become commonplace, as epitomized by Willem's larger-than-life acting career in *A Little Life*. Faced with this normative reality, Yanagihara imagines an art form on the horizon of melodrama: cutting becomes an innovative mode of artistic expression in which emotional experience is no longer contingent on an audience. Simply put, self-harm shirks the pressures of spectatorship in favor of heightened feelings experienced by the artist alone. Yanagihara posits in *A Little Life*, perhaps paradoxically at first glance, a distinctly queer aesthetic mode: anti-theatrical melodrama.

V. Utopia by a Thousand Cuts

In the opening lines of his field-defining book *Cruising Utopia*, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz makes a bold, even shocking declaration: "Queerness is not yet here" (1). He brilliantly argues:

> Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic,

> frequently contains blueprints and schemata for a forward-drawing futurity. … Queerness is essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world. (1)

Put another way, queer aesthetics offer a vision of utopia—a potential future outside the normative confines of modern society. My understanding of queerness is informed largely by Muñoz's writing. Thus, when I describe Jude's artistic project as queering melodrama, I am compelled to search for utopian impulses in his work—for glimmers of a future that transcends the here and now. Literary scholar Amy Rushton has also invoked utopian thinking in her discussion of self-harm in *A Little Life*; however, her argument remains at the intersection of disability studies and neoliberalism, disregarding the queer implications of utopian thinking. But if "queerness's form is utopian" (30), as Muñoz suggests, then how might we locate utopia in Jude's queer art form? In the final act of my thesis, I will explore how Jude's distinctly anti-theatrical melodrama allows him to imagine—and even momentarily enter—utopia.

In a chapter of *Cruising Utopia* titled "A Jeté Out the Window," Muñoz offers a compelling way to read self-harm as a fundamentally queer act—a reading, I believe, we can draw on as we locate the utopian tendencies in Jude's queer melodramatic art form. Muñoz's discussion of self-harm, specifically the act of suicide, centers on the death of avant-garde American dancer Fred Herko in 1964. The story goes as follows: Herko took a bath at his friend's Greenwich Village apartment in New York City, performed a nude dance to Mozart after emerging from the bathroom, and then concluded his performance by leaping out of an open window in front of his friend. The five-story drop killed Herko, and left his friend—in classic melodramatic fashion—unable to speak about the incident for years (148). Muñoz, in reflecting upon Herko's notorious death, offers the following interpretation: "Death is often viewed in Western thought as quintessentially antiutopian because it absolutely defines the end of potentiality. But to make ‘death art,’ especially in the flamboyant manner that Herko did, is to move beyond death as finitude” (149). Muñoz expands on this idea later in the chapter, asserting that “queerness and that particular modality of loss known as suicide seem linked,” given that suicide is “a performance of radical negativity, utopian in its negation of death as ultimate uncontrollable finitude” (167). In other words, suicide—by embracing death rather than avoiding it—becomes a queer act. Death no longer represents an unstoppable end, but a horizon of possibility. We can queer our conceptualization of suicide by thinking of it not simply as a hard stop on life, but as a leap from the oppressive here and now of the present world into a potentially utopian future.

Drawing on Muñoz’s writing about suicide, I believe, provides a way to reconceptualize self-harm more broadly. The theoretical framework he offers for thinking about suicide can be extended to other forms of self-harm, because each act of self-injury represents a queering of the notion that bodily pain is solely something to be avoided. In *A Little Life*, Jude welcomes physical suffering into his life with each cut, knowing that the demons from his past that haunt him—“hyenas,” as he calls them—“will be quieted only by his pain” (440). Jude grapples with his trauma—the memories of Caleb, Brother Luke, Dr. Taylor, and everyone else who has hurt him before—by inflicting pain upon his own body in order to negate the memories of the prior pain inflicted upon him by others. In essence, Jude queers his relationship with pain, from something he is powerless to avoid to something he can actually control. Jude “appreciate[s] … the control of the cuts” because all the other pain in his life remains uncontrollable (365). His embrace of pain, in line with Muñoz’s ideas about suicide, make Jude’s cutting a radically queer act. In order to sustain himself night after night—to outrun the hyenas that constantly nip at his heels and howl in his ears—Jude takes a nonnormative approach to survival: self-harm.

Jude's refusal to simply "get better" rejects a kind of normative thinking that believes the only approach to dealing with trauma is to heal from it. In the 21st century, healing is typically rooted in the premise of self-care and the promises of therapy and medication. Recent years have seen a "revolution in treatments of traumatic stress using a combination of drugs focused on serotonin and cognitive behavioral therapy" (Luckhurst 4). Doctors routinely prescribe antidepressants to patients and refer them to therapists to heal their trauma. In *A Little Life*, Andy and Jude's therapist, Dr. Loehmann, epitomize this normative notion of healing. Jude's forced therapy sessions with Dr. Loehmann, done to satisfy Willem and Andy, do absolutely nothing to heal him: in his "eighteen months with Dr. Loehmann, he had revealed almost nothing, had spent most of his time childishly protecting his privacy, trying not to say anything, wasting both his and the doctor's time" (508). Yanagihara's writing reveals a blatant skepticism toward the modern field of psychiatry. She possesses a distrust that comes through in both *A Little Life* and her many media appearances. In one article, she bluntly tells an interviewer: "I don't believe in it—talk therapy." She admits being "suspicious about the field" because therapists so forcefully insist on healing the patient, unlike "almost every doctor of the critically sick [who] understands the patient's right to refuse treatment" (Kavanagh). Cutting, in the normative eyes of modern psychology, could never be viewed as a legitimate means of coping with trauma. These self-harming behaviors create more pain instead of curing it. Thus, Yanagihara turns her attention to the aesthetic realm as an alternative space where Jude can negate his trauma through art, by constructing a utopian world in which he is momentarily free from the terrors of his past.

Understandably, it might feel difficult to conceptualize self-harm—an act which deliberately destroys the self—as somehow utopian. Does the act of drawing a blade across one's skin not seem like taking a step one inch—then two, three, four—closer to death? Typically, physical pain is something to be avoided, not willingly embraced. But for Jude, his cutting sustains him. His art, while an act of physical self-destruction, simultaneously allows Jude to briefly experience a moment where he can “begin forgetting” (294)—forgetting his countless abusers, as well as the physical and mental marks they’ve left on him. When he cuts, he “[feels] himself relax, [feels] his memories dim” (360), as he creates a temporary world for himself in which he is liberated from his past. He can forget the feelings of shame and self-blame connected to his childhood trauma. This element of “forgetting” is critical. Cutting allows Jude to forget his former life, as he simultaneously envisions a potential future in which his trauma will no longer haunt him, when he will simply be able to forget the pain caused by others. The act of forgetting, then, can be read simultaneously as an act of creation. Cutting helps Jude negotiate his present pain by allowing him to temporarily create a utopian world where he is unencumbered by the memories of his past. Buoyed by these brief glimpses of utopia, Jude continues enduring life for the people that matter most to him: his friends and family. Of course, Jude does eventually make the final leap towards death. But prior to this moment, non-fatal self-harm allows Jude to straddle two worlds for much of his adult life: the present one, filled with a successful career and people who love him, and a future one, in which he is no longer tormented by the memories of the people that hurt him as a child.

In fact, we see Yanagihara deliberately associate Jude’s cutting with the concept of futurity. In one scene, she describes the immense toll cutting has taken on his physical form: “Jude’s skin was as diverse, as wondrous, and in places so unlike skin as he had felt or understood it that it too seemed something otherworldly and futuristic, a prototype of what flesh might look like ten thousand years from now” (406). Jude’s cutting creates a sight so utterly unfamiliar that it seems pulled straight from the future, the word “otherworldly” suggesting an alien strangeness to his body. The description of Jude’s skin as “a prototype of what flesh might look like ten thousand years from now” situates cutting, the act which transforms his skin, as a revolutionary art form that thrusts Jude's physical body into a distant, unfamiliar future. This forward-looking inclination of Jude's cutting leads me to classify it as a queer act. In the words of Muñoz, queer futurity is "not an end but an opening or horizon … a future being within the present that is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination" (91). He deftly argues that "we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent" (30). For Jude, his cutting creates a horizon of possibility in which he can imagine, however momentary, an existence unafflicted by childhood trauma. The cutting grants Jude a momentary sense of autonomy from his past, as he rejects the tyranny of his memories and creates a world where he is the sole arbiter of his own pain, not his litany of past abusers. To an outside observer like Willem or Jude's physician, Andy, the cutting represents precisely the trauma that Jude is escaping from. They see his self-harm as a glaring manifestation of all his past suffering—as Jude torturing himself for reasons completely out of his control. But in Jude's eyes, his singular goal, utopia, need not concern them.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche describes the world-making potential of art. He writes that art more broadly "reveals to us the playful construction and destruction of individual worlds" (142). He elaborates that this "world-building force" is akin "to a playing child that places stones here and there and builds sandy hills only to overthrow them again" (142). Puchner speaks of a similar world-building potential in his discussion of closet dramas. He writes: "Closet dramas use their freedom from the normativity of the theater to create worlds characterized by various forms of ambiguity and deviance" (17). In their rejection of the normative theatrics of a stage and viewing audience, closet dramas allow artists to make art without the limitations and pressures of spectatorship. This audiencelessness allows ambiguity and deviance—such as the morally ambiguous, arguably deviant practice of making art through self-harm—to thrive. As Puchner notes, closet dramas emerged in response to concerns about censorship, coming both from critical theater managers as well as internally from artists who worried if their art would appeal to public taste (16). In much the same way, the privacy of his locked bathroom allows Jude to engage in an aesthetic act free from the normative constraints of public taste—namely, the limitations surrounding the supposedly "proper" way to heal from trauma. Jude, as an artist, possesses the power to create and destroy worlds—the power to contend with his suffering in the present not by healing from it, but by negating it altogether. Through his anti-theatrical melodrama, Jude gains access to the possibility of a utopian world within a closet of his own creation.

For many queer individuals, the closet represents a space characterized by dueling senses of safety and oppression. "There can be few gay people," writes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, "…in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence" (68). Within the closet, queer people can shield themselves from the harm that might accompany openly embracing their true sexuality or gender. But this need to protect oneself—to perform normative heterosexuality out of a desire for safety—also illustrates the oppressive confines of straight society, where queer difference is suffocated at every turn. Jude's self-harm occurs in an analogous closet, although his possesses some distinct differences. At night when Jude cuts, he retreats to a closet of his own making, and there achieves entrance into an aesthetic realm where he exists temporarily unencumbered by his childhood trauma. Here, too, we see a queer contradiction in Jude's artistic project. Intriguingly, his closet represents a site for creating, entering, and exploring utopia—it is a place of immense pain, surely, but also a place where he can negate the pain of his traumatic past. Yanagihara posits a closeted queer aesthetics in which the traditional confines of the closet do not oppress Jude as much as they allow him to innovate new queer ways of being in the world. He learns to be the arbiter of his own pain, momentarily challenging the oppressive hold that figures from his past—like Brother Luke, Dr. Taylor, and

Caleb—have on him, and instead imagines a possible world where they never existed. Of course, this project of severing oneself from reality comes at great cost to the self, as it essentially trades one form of suffering for another. But for Jude, his self-harm—a queer act of anti-theatrical melodrama—ultimately becomes the only way to definitively quiet the trauma that haunts him, by supplanting the memories of past pains with new ones.

Conclusion

At the start of this thesis, my goal was to center melodrama in our discussion of Hanya Yanagihara's 2015 novel *A Little Life*. Prior critics have repeatedly noted the novel's over-the-top, "melodramatic style" (Rushton 197); however, my intention has been to locate the novel more precisely within the history of melodrama, and consider what deeper questions Yanagihara might be exploring about the melodramatic mode in her writing. Throughout the course of this paper, I have argued that Yanagihara stretches the limits of melodrama in multiple ways. First, she depicts Jude's self-harm as an art form that extends melodrama to the body, and thus, can be placed in the mode's evolutionary history spanning a variety of mediums, including theater, literature, and television. Second, she queers the limits of the mode itself by imagining private acts of cutting as a kind of nonnormative, anti-theatrical melodrama that creates heightened feeling in an artist without the need for an audience to register his emotions. Building off these arguments, I have concluded that Jude's self-harm is a queer art form rife with utopian possibility—specifically, the possibility of momentarily forgetting his childhood trauma, and thus, entering a future world where the memories of his past abusers can no longer torment him.

In the opening pages of this project, I proclaimed that I would remain guided by a firm belief in possibility. More precisely, I believed in the possibility of forging new conceptual connections between both self-harm and art, and queerness and melodrama. Now, at the end of this project, I am also left thinking about the idea of possibility. More precisely, I am pondering what the future of melodrama holds. Although this future is filled with unknown possibilities, history has shown us that melodrama will continue to evolve across artistic mediums, influencing more and more art forms. If melodrama really is everywhere right now, as multiple critics have suggested, then what art is still untouched? And how long until melodrama finds it? Melodrama will continue to evolve, I imagine, beyond the queer anti-theatrical variety I have argued exists in *A Little Life* through Jude's self-harm. As we have seen, melodrama's classically theatrical characteristics—previously linked with queer aesthetics—have already taken on a normative stance in our contemporary society given their sheer popularity. However, I am hopeful that my conception of an anti-theatrical melodrama will open up new methods of analysis within melodrama studies. Looking ahead, I hope we can expand our understanding of melodrama beyond conventionally popular forms and explore new kinds of melodramatic art that might not otherwise be earnestly analyzed—or even considered art for that matter.

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